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UNCLAS ROME 004817

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FROM THE U.S. MISSION TO THE UN AGENCIES IN ROME

STATE FOR EB/PCHASE, EB/TPP/BTT/DMALAC, OES/EGC
FAS FOR SBLEGGI, RHUGHES, LREICH, BRICHEY, BSIMMONDS,
CMP/GFD

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: EAGR ETRD FAO

SUBJECT: BIOTECH OUTREACH TO FAO STAFF AND PERMREPS

¶11. The US Mission to the UN Agencies in Rome (FODAG) organized two events for a visiting team from the National Center for Food and Agricultural Policy (NCFAP) on October 6-7: a seminar at the FAO for professional staff and a small coffee for selected permanent representatives to FAO at DCM Cleverley's residence. The aim was to provide scientific information on the potential economic and environmental benefits of agricultural biotechnology.

Technical Seminar for FAO Staff

¶12. More than 50 professionals (20 from the Agriculture Department) participated. Mahmoud Solh, Director, Plant Production and Protection Division, Agriculture Department, FAO, introduced the speakers.

¶13. Prof. Adrienne Massey (A. Massey and Associates) put biotech into the context of a logical development of agricultural science that could be used as a tool for innovation comparable with other measures and techniques in order to improve production and benefit the farmer as well as consumer.

¶14. Mr. Leonard Gianessi (NCFAP) focused on the economic and environmental benefits of reduced pesticide use with a series of slides that contrasted the performance and yield of biotech crops with their non-biotech equivalents. The examples were taken from experience in the US and the EU. NCFAP is in the process of developing additional case studies in the European context.

¶15. Dr. Jennifer Thomson (University of Cape Town) discussed her own research in South Africa, aimed at creating plant varieties with greater resistance to drought, salinity, heat and cold.

¶16. Questions from the FAO audience included concerns about the risks associated with a new technology and new products. Many of these concerns came from the social scientists present. Massey argued that biotech scientists had greater control over the process of genetic change in their experiments than in traditional plant breeding, where numerous characteristics were altered at once, sometimes in unknown combinations. There was some criticism of NCFAP's statistics and methodology, and a few questioned the motives of the US Mission in bringing NCFAP to the FAO. It was clear that some FAO staff members were well versed in biotech research; the biological scientists in the audience seemed more comfortable with the technology and excited by the research presented by Dr. Thomson.

¶17. Other questions touched on broader policy aspects, such as farm subsidies and labeling. Biotech's capability to address particular plant diseases and pests also drew the interest of the audience. The Chief of the Seed and Plant Genetic Resources Service lamented the lack of funds for research, recalling that more resources were available for South America in the 1970s.

Briefing for Permreps at DCM's Residence

¶18. The NCFAP team gave an abbreviated version of their presentation to country representatives to the FAO from Egypt, Japan, Kuwait, Malaysia, Indonesia, China and Spain over coffee at DCM Cleverley's residence. The ensuing discussion was called to a halt after two hours.

-- Egypt reacted to the opportunity for Cairo-Cape Town cooperation on biotech by arranging appointments for Dr. Thomson to meet with Egyptian scientific organizations.

-- Japan's concerns about risk containment were addressed

by Massey with her explanation of relative risks of biotechnology experiments versus traditional breeding.

-- Kuwait recognized the value of development of drought, salt, heat and cold resistant plants and offered examples of the various ways that scientific information is spread and reaches the public.

-- Malaysia saw a difference between developing technology at home and importing it. This led to a discussion of the importance of utilizing innovations from whatever source. Thomson gave the example of small-scale South African cotton farmers who readily rely on imported Bt cotton seed.

-- Indonesia was looking to benefit its farmers through increased exports, and worried that economies of scale were needed for applications of biotechnology. Further discussion was aimed at correcting the misapprehension that GM crops are of value only on a large scale.

-- China examined the soybean situation. American soybeans are more expensive than native Chinese varieties, but are preferred by the Chinese people so that the government has to decide how much to import. The broader trade questions were not pursued.

-- Spain was concerned about the dissemination of information through labeling and the process of consumer acceptance. The team used the opportunity to discuss the US approach to labeling.

¶9. This event was marked by lively discussion, probing questions and serious note taking. The invitees appeared to be using the opportunity to strengthen their own answers to questions they are regularly asked to field.

Comment

¶10. The two NCFAP presentation demonstrated the potential for using scientific briefings to stimulate more informed and thoughtful discussion of biotechnology. Such information is particularly valuable when it is presented by experts who are seen, by sometimes-skeptical audiences, to be rigorously scientific and independent of vested commercial interests.

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2003ROME04817 - Classification: UNCLASSIFIED